

# “This Game Sucks”: How to Improve the Gamification of Education

**G**amification. Maybe you’ve heard of it. It’s the new term invented to describe the application of game mechanics such as points, badges, and levels to non-game processes. Your first introduction to gamification may have been through a location-based check-in service like foursquare. Check in at the local Starbucks often enough and you get a Starbucks badge. Check in more than anyone else and you get to be mayor of your favorite local java joint. Though mobile devices and downloadable applications may have expanded the market for gamified systems, they’re nothing new. Accumulating airline miles, earning frequent-shopper discounts, and even increasing gas mileage through the use of the gas efficiency gauge on a hybrid car are all, somewhat, games. Gamification is an effort to gain points and status for completing tasks. It may be the new hot thing to marketers, but to those of us in academia, these systems should seem familiar.

Education has been a system of status and points since the dawn of the Industrial Age. Scores on assignments serve as points. Graduation is a level achieved. A diploma is a badge of confidence from an accredited institution. However, critics of gamification claim that those who are trying to spice up their businesses with badges and levels don’t actually understand how a game works. Rather than adding levels of engagement that make something fun, some of these applications simply add tracking systems, which these critics refer to as “pointsification.”<sup>1</sup> Just adding badges won’t automatically make people want to earn them. Allowing one user to accumulate more points than other users won’t necessarily motivate any of the users. I would argue that education has made the same mistake. Perhaps education could be improved by ditching the points and adding the game; technology can help.

## What Is a Game?

The first step is to understand exactly what a game is. We’ve all played games, but because of the wide variety, it can be challenging to nail down what makes a game a game. I’ve identified three basic characteristics:

1. *A goal:* Every game has a win condition: the combination of events and accomplishments that players need to achieve in order to end the game. In every good game, the goal is clear, and the rest of the game is constructed to create a system in which the tools necessary to reach the goal are available.

Ultimately, what’s most important about the goal is that players care enough to want to accomplish it.

2. *Obstacles:* Easy games aren’t much fun to play. Though the tools necessary to reach the goal should be part of the game, difficulties and challenges should be part as well. Without those obstacles, winning wouldn’t mean much.
3. *Collaboration or competition:* Games come in two basic flavors: those in which winning is determined by defeating another player, and those in which winning is determined by beating the game itself. The former can create competition among players. The second encourages a player to compete against him/herself until the player beats the game.

True gamification requires that all three characteristics be present. For example, if we think of foursquare as a game (whether or not it’s a good one is up for debate), we can see that the goal is to acquire badges that earn the user a reputation and a sense of accomplishment. Obstacles in foursquare are the simple logistics of traveling to a location and taking the trouble to check in through the application. Finally, some users may choose to compete with other users by taking away mayorship of a popular spot, whereas some users may simply challenge themselves to collect the badges that they see as fun or interesting.

## Is Higher Education Already a Game?

How does the typical higher education system match up to games? I would argue that it can be considered either as a very weak game or as a misunderstood point system.

Even though those of us in higher education would like to think that students understand the goal of finishing a degree or passing a course, the reality is that they may not. Ask students why they’re in college, and they’re likely to answer that earning a degree will bring them more money after graduation. It’s extremely rare for students to say that they enrolled simply for the intellectual stimulation. So if education is a game, and students misunderstand what the goal is, they’re bound to misunderstand the way the game works, as well as the methods they should use to win. If the goal is to earn a higher salary after graduation, then the game play will focus on courses that will yield the highest impact on a résumé; in that case, success would simply be passing the courses, not learning.

Faculty think of the obstacles in their courses as the intellectual challenges of mastering the content of the course. To overcome these obstacles, students are expected to engage in



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critical thinking and to push themselves to consider new ideas. However, students who aren't aligned to the true goal of an education may not see it this way. Getting past a demanding faculty member and earning the desired grade may be the only obstacles they see. The results are cheating, grade grubbing, and complaining that faculty aren't fair or grade too harshly. Again, misunderstanding the game leads to poor play.

Last is the issue of collaboration and competition. If the goal is intellectual growth, then classmates and faculty are teammates. If the goal is to beat the system and earn more money, then classmates are competition and faculty are obstacles to be overcome. The result is animosity and demands on higher education institutions to become degree mills rather than places of learning.

### Improving the "Game" of Education

What can we do to fix this problem? I see two choices: (1) take away the pointsification; or (2) improve the game. Grades and degrees aren't going anywhere, so the first option won't work. We're left with the challenge of taking a rather poor game and making it a better one. Making school a game is not a new idea; in fact, there are entire schools that are run as games and that are doing quite well. Of course, many in higher education think of games as frivolous and will say that the job of faculty and administrators is to deliver a quality education, not an entertaining experience. To me, a quality education and an entertaining experience are one and the same. True intellectual

challenge is exhilarating. Lifelong learners become so because they find learning fun.

Changing the fundamental nature of higher education is a daunting task, but there are small steps we can take. Here are three ideas for faculty and some example applications of each:

1. Make goals clear, and explain how the course, major, or degree prepares learners to achieve those goals. Ensure that students align on the goals and want to achieve them.
  - Spend as much time in class and on the syllabus covering the importance of the learning goals as is spent explaining the grading system of the class.
  - When writing assignment descriptions, include a "How you can use this in the future" section.
2. Make progress transparent to each learner. Grades and assignment completion are not the only ways to measure progress toward achieving the goals.
  - Give students a way to track their progress on each learning goal of the class. An online checklist that students fill out on their own can help them stay on track.
  - Create commodities for desired behavior. For example, hand out poker chips to students who contribute in class; a student who cashes in ten poker chips earns a "Top Contributor" badge.
  - Add peer voting to class activities such as discussions and online forums. Allowing students to identify the contributions that they see as valuable will highlight good models for other students to follow, as well as provide positive feedback to the contributing student.
3. Think about your own game play. Reflection can reveal insights into innovations that can be leveraged in education.
  - Consider the game apps on your phone or iPad. How do you decide which to play and which to ditch? What makes a game "fun" to play?
  - Ask students which games they play and how they learned to play them. Talking about how we learn can help students improve their own techniques.

"Gamification" is about motivation and engagement. Making learning fun does not require huge investments in technology. Instead, focusing on the ways that entertainment technology engages us can result in methods that we can transfer to any learning situation. ■

#### Note

1. Margaret Robertson, "Can't Play, Won't Play," *Hide&Seek*, October 6, 2010, <<http://www.hideandseek.net/cant-play-wont-play/>>.

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